

173: Safeguards

Scarlett sat in the foyer of the lodgings that had been provided for her and her group at the Golden Griffin Inn, sipping tea from a cup that one of the employees had provided. Their accommodations took up an entire section of the inn, consisting of six rooms, a small gathering area and dining hall, and this small foyer.

The establishment catered exclusively to nobles and other well-off individuals, and Scarlett had made sure to reserve their lodgings well in advance. It honestly felt more like a high-class hotel than an 'inn', and she imagined this was the closest one came to staying at a five-star hotel in this world, excluding places like Dawnlight Palace in Elystead and Grovefort Castle in Windgrove.

On the table before her lay a book on the tenets and histories of the original ten deacons who had made up the Followers of Ittar's Quorum during the early days of the empire. As she waited for the others to return, she leisurely read through its pages while drinking her tea.

Fynn had stayed with her earlier as well, but while he could display impressive amounts of patience and focus when he had a mission to fulfill, he wasn't the type to simply sit still and do nothing otherwise. For now, he had left for his own quarters, where she presumed he was occupied with his meditation and communing with the ancestors of his tribe.

A knock sounded from the foyer's entrance as an employee opened the door and peeked inside. "How are you, my Lady? Is everything to your satisfaction?"

Scarlett looked up from her book and at the man. "Yes, for now. I will notify you if that changes."

"Of course, of course. We are at your disposal if there is anything that you need." The man slightly lowered his head. "I have come to inform you, as you requested, that your companions seem to have returned. A party of three, two women and a young man, is currently being led here as we speak."

"I see."

The man performed a small bow as he left, gently closing the door behind him.

Scarlett's gaze lingered on the doors even after he disappeared. Eventually, she rose from her seat, returned the book to her [Pouch of Holding], and walked down the hallway connecting to the foyer until she reached the quarters that had been prepared for her.

Inside was a beautifully furnished room with a long bed against one of the walls and a pair of large windows overlooking what was probably a nice, tiny garden during the warmer times of the year. In the corner stood a round hickory table with two chairs. Walking over to it, she sat down and rested an arm against the table, tapping her finger on the wood.

She wasn't sure what to expect from Rosa's return now that she had sent the woman off to handle this by herself. In the game, you were supposed to be with her. Scarlett would have liked to do that if she could. But she was already pushing the boundaries of what her pact with

Anguish allowed by giving Rosa tasks that involved interacting with important quest points from the game. Anything beyond this, and she wasn't sure what would happen.

Maybe if she could convince Rosa to get help from Allyssa or any of the others, this would be easier. But the woman might be just as likely to push them away as agree to that, which made things difficult.

Nevertheless, the most important thing was to make progress in dealing with Rosa's demon problem. Anguish would be furious—an incensed Vile wasn't something *anyone* wanted on their hands—but for now, she was at least somewhat held in check. On several fronts, really. There was her pact with Scarlett, Beldon's investigations into Count Soames if those went anywhere, and the other Viles encroaching on Anguish's territory while trying to find out more about the potential incarnate.

The pact between Scarlett and Anguish would last for at least a bit more time. She didn't know *how* long before Anguish would be able to take control of Rosa completely again, but she was hoping for at least a month or two. Even a few weeks would be enough.

She had been slightly worried a while back that there were signs of it happening soon with Rosa, but things had appeared relatively calm these last few days. Presumably, that had been when The Gentleman spread the news of Rosa's existence and sicced most of the Blazes at Anguish.

She had even inquired with Fynn just to be sure, and he'd told her that he hadn't detected much of a demonic presence coming from the bard lately.

That gave Scarlett hope that things might actually go off without a hitch for once. Of course, she wasn't *expecting* everything to go so smoothly, but it would certainly be nice if it did.

As she waited by herself in the room, she eventually heard three sets of footsteps out in the hallway, along with some faint voices. Soon, two doors opened and closed, and then there was only one set of steps left, moving in Scarlett's direction.

She hid her left hand beneath her right.

The door opened, and Rosa entered the room.

The first thing Scarlett noticed was how tired the woman looked.

It was less like she had spent the afternoon running around the city carrying out simple tasks and more like she had just attended a family member's funeral. Scarlett couldn't help but wonder what excuse the bard had given Allyssa and Shin for her appearance.

Rosa quietly closed the door behind her and crossed the room. Scarlett watched her as she stopped next to the table and sat down.

Almost a full minute of silence followed.

“How are you?” Scarlett eventually asked, studying the silhouette of the woman’s face. Rosa’s curled hair cascaded over her shoulders and covered most of her cheeks, so Scarlett only saw the edges of her mouth and the tip of her nose from this angle.

Rosa blew back a lock of brown hair, turning to look at Scarlett from dark eye sockets — darker and deeper set than they had been that morning. Perhaps others wouldn’t have noticed, but Scarlett always paid close attention to the bard.

The woman seemed to be holding herself back from going into one of her usual smiles. “Look at me. Hard. What do you see?”

Scarlett watched her for several seconds. “...You look worn out.”

“Exactly. *Exactly.*” Rosa met her eyes and opened her mouth to continue, then she stopped. She closed her eyes and took a breath before slowly letting it out. When she opened them again, there was a bit more composure in her gaze. “We can’t talk about it...can we? I can’t even tell you what happened, or what I saw? Am I wrong? Am I?”

Scarlett stayed quiet for a while before finally shaking her head. “Even doing this much is unsound. But I did not think I could simply leave you be this time.”

It was a question of what counted as interfering with Anguish or the Vile’s connection to Rosa. If there was one thing Scarlett had learned since she struck this deal, it was that demonic pacts like these had a bit of leeway in their interpretation. More leeway than she had originally expected, in fact. But she could sense that her actions this day had been balancing on the edge. The seal on her left hand had made its presence known more than once.

“...Could you stop me?” Rosa asked. “Really stop me? If it came to it?”

Scarlett remained silent. That wasn’t something she felt she could answer under the current circumstances.

The woman chuckled. “Yeah, thought as much. It’s not every afternoon one can expect one’s boss to tell you whether they can murder you in a pinch or not.” Scarlett frowned, but the woman let out a long sigh before she could say anything. “I don’t know if this has been a terrible day or a great one. It dredged up enough memories to burrow a city block or two, but at the same time... This might be the first time in my *life* where I actually have something *real* to go off of.”

Rosa’s violet eyes looked straight at Scarlett. “I bet you don’t understand what that means too.”

“I believe I do,” Scarlett said.

The woman let out a light chuckle, shaking her head gently. “No, I really don’t think you do.”

“...Well, if it is good, then I am glad for you, nonetheless.”

“Wish I could be as well. But truth be told, I’m still about as confused as a headless chicken in a coop of scrambled cockatrices.” Rosa leaned back in her chair and gazed up at the ceiling.

The both of them sat there without speaking for a while longer.

“You know, I met this old lady today,” Rosa finally continued. “Had a bit of a chit-chat with her, and...I don’t think I treated her well. Mind you, she was about as prickly as a thornbush and as grumpy as a senile cat, but at least she tried to help me. She told me about someone.”

Scarlett kept her eyes on the woman as she listened to her words. “Is that so?”

She had a general idea of how that meeting could have gone. It wouldn’t surprise her if the old lady never wanted to meet Rosa again in the future. But hopefully, the bard learned something useful, at least.

“Do you know where Crowcairn is?” Rosa asked.

Scarlett forced down the small smile that threatened to appear on her mouth. “Crowcairn? I cannot say that I have heard of it before, no. Perhaps you can find it on one of the maps that I asked you to procure for me?”

The woman paused, turning to look directly at her. Scarlett maintained a neutral expression, even as the woman’s lips curved up. “Oh, yes. *Indubitably*. What a stroke of serendipity that I just so happened to buy that today.”

Scarlett nodded. “Simply ensure that you return it to me once you are finished. I have need of it, after all.”

Rosa brought up one of her hands and looked at it, huffing on her fingernails before buffing them on her tunic with a smirk. “Why, *of course*.” Then she shifted her attention back to Scarlett, eyeing her for a while, and her smirk eventually faded away into only a small smile as she looked away across the room with a distant gaze. “...We were staying here for a while this time, weren’t we?”

Scarlett nodded. “One week, at the very least.”

She was expecting it to take at minimum a few days before the Followers got back regarding the whole Sunfire Shrine matter, and if they didn’t, she would need some extra time to find another way inside. Until then, there were also a number of dungeons that she planned on looking up while they were waiting.

There was also Rosa’s business here in Bridgespell that had to be dealt with.

Because of that, she’d made sure they had several different options for when they could return to Freybrook.

One week was more time than they’d spent at any place that wasn’t Freybrook or Elystead, but she was expecting it to pass by quickly.

“You wouldn’t mind if I took a couple of days to visit an acquaintance of mine sometime during our stay, then?” Rosa asked.

“I would not, no,” Scarlett replied. “You may feel free to take your leave at any time you see fit.”

“...Thanks.” The bard fell silent for a moment. Then she pushed herself out of her chair as she stood. “Think I’ll push that off for a couple of days, though. Have to prepare mentally and all that. You know how it is.”

“Of course.”

“Maybe I’ll even take more than a couple of days. A few days. Few sounds good.”

“If that is what you think is best for you.”

“Can’t say I know a lick about if it’s for the best, but...” Rosa looked down at Scarlett, and they locked gazes. “...I’m not sure I can do it.”

“I have faith that you can,” Scarlett said. “For all the time you spend extolling your own virtues, I personally am of the opinion that you underestimate yourself far more than you should, Rosa.”

The woman’s eyes widened, and she stared at her for a long, drawn-out moment. Eventually, she took a step back and turned around, only barely managing to hide the smile on her face. “I’m damn lucky that I met you, Red.”

“I am aware.”

Rosa chuckled and started leaving the room, waving her hand over her shoulder. “Just call for me if you feel lonely and want to hear a dainty little tune that’ll cheer you up. Just for you, I’ll make sure to be here in a jiffy.”

With that, she reached the door and opened it, exiting into the hallway outside and leaving Scarlett alone in the room.

Scarlett kept her eyes on the door for a while after Rosa had left, lost in thought.

Finally, she lifted her right hand and glanced down at her left one, eyeing the faint imprint visible on the skin. She could imagine Anguish’s displeasure at the moment, and it would likely grow worse from now on.

That made her want to smile once again.

She really *wasn’t* beyond pettiness, it seemed.

The brief satisfaction disappeared. If only there weren’t so much risk for Rosa involved.

She brought out the book she had been reading earlier and flipped to the page where she had stopped, trying to shift her mind to something more productive. It didn’t do for her to be any more concerned than necessary. She was doing what she could, and that was that. She was committed to helping Rosa where she could, and the rest was up to the woman herself for the time being.

Hopefully, that would be enough.